

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 4

JUDGING AND ACTING BY GOD'S LAW

I. Chapter 2 develops two arguments, one about the need to see God's goodness and glory in people of all social strata, and another about the need for good deeds to show forth and complete faith.

A. Fr. Harrington in the *Sacra Pagina* commentary argues that both of the arguments proceed along a common first century style of rhetoric. Many considered it most effective for persuasive (or deliberative) texts to proceed along the following lines:

1. The theme

2. The ratio or reasoning

3. A further proof of the reason

4. An embellishment

5. A conclusion

B. Although Fr. Harrington does not note it, the texts seem to put the embellishment, or example, second after the theme.

C. Thus the first argument proceeds along the lines of

i. The theme that partiality is contrary to the law.

ii. The example of showing favoritism to the wealthy in the synagogue

iii. The argument that the poor are elected by God for spiritual riches and that the wealthy are often persecutors

and blasphemers.

- iv. A further argument that partiality involves a violation of the whole law and thus cannot be tolerated
- v. A conclusion that the law of freedom calls for us to act with mercy to all peoples.

D. The second argument proceeds along the lines of

- i. The theme that faith without works is in vain.
- ii. The example that one who neglects those in need is not living out the faith.
- iii. The argument that faith is shown forth in works and that mere belief in God does one no more good than it does the demons.
- iv. The further argument from the examples of Abraham and Rahab.
- v. The conclusion that faith without works is like a body without life.

II. The letter then begins some practical applications of the law with reference to recognizing the dignity of people in all social classes.

A. The section begins in condemning partiality in apply the faith of Jesus Christ, which could mean faith in Him or the faith in God that He taught.

- The opening reminds the reader that Jesus is the Lord of glory, literally translated "the Lord Jesus Christ of glory." Part of the idea is to remind people that glory comes not from worldly wealth or status, but rather from that faith in Jesus. This idea builds upon the Old Testament notion that God is the glory of His people. See Duet. 10:21

B. The letter then switches to an example regarding to people who are presumably new to the community.

1. St. James refers to a "synagogue," rather than a church (ecclesia, which means assembly and was generally used to mean the church by early Christians.) This reference indicates that the audience was still in the first era of Christian worship. There is perhaps also a subtle reminder that the ancient law of the Jews (which was studied in the synagogue) has not been abolished but fulfilled. See Matt. 5:17-20. For the ancient law likewise condemned partiality in judgments. See Ex. 23:1-6; Lev. 19:15; Duet. 1:17; Prov. 24:23; see also Duet. 17:10.

2. Jesus had condemned the scribes and Pharisees for loving the places of honor at banquet, for that involved seeking worldly glory. See Matt. 23:6; Mark 12:39; Luke 11:43, 20:46; see also 1 Cor. 11:17-22. This example looks at the other side of the coin, telling the readers not to feed such desires.

3. The gold rings would be an external sign of great and perhaps ostentatious wealth. There is perhaps a contrast between the rings of worldly wealth, and the ring of favor that the loving father gives his repentant . See Luke 15:22. The finery may also reflect the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. See Luke 16:19-31.

4. The letter says that favoring the rich man would make the whole assembly unjust judges. The implication is that the all Christians are being exalted to the level of judges and beyond. See Wis. 3:8; 1 Cor. 6:3. However, by failing to see justly people are acting rather as the unjust judges condemned in the Old Testament. See Ps. 82:2; Dan. 13:5; Hab. 1:4.

C. The letter then describes the folly of honoring the wealthy, pointing out that they often least deserve it.

1. The letter points out that God reverses the usual standards, choosing the poor to be rich and faith and inherit the kingdom. See, e.g., Matt. 5:3, 11:5; Luke 1:52-53, 6:20; 1 Cor. 1:26-29. The Old Testament had already presented the poor as especially being protected by God. See Duet. 17:10; Ps. 35:10; Is. 61:1. Jesus raised this teaching higher by saying that poverty of spirit can be a source of blessings.

2. The letter then points out that, as a practical matter, the rich, and especially those who show off wealth, are generally the least religious and in fact persecute believers. It is thus the height of folly, even from the standpoint of common sense, to give them special honor.

- a. The reference to hauling the readers off to court could mean that the readers were oppressed because they were of a lower class or because they were Christians.
- b. The blasphemy referred to could be either literally foul language against God and the faith. Or St. James may mean that, by their actions in oppressing others, the wealthy are in effect blaspheming, as the prophets often call rendering justice true sacrifice. See Is. 1:16-17; Zech. 7:10. St. Paul said that he had been a blasphemer when he persecuted Christians. See 1 Tim. 1:13. Blasphemy was a capital offense. See Lev. 24:10-16; 1 Kings 21:10-14; Matt. 26:65. Thus, St. James is accusing the wealthy of very serious sins. See Is. 1:23; Amos 4:1-4; Mal. 3:5; Wis. 6:10.

3. The letter says that these offenses are against the "exalted name" that is invoked over Christians. God's name is described as powerful and holy in the Old Testament. See, e.g. Ex. 3:6, 14-16; Deut. 28:10; Ps. 9:11, 33:21, 124:8; Joel 3:5; Mal. 2:2, 5. And likewise, the name of Jesus confers God's glory and power in the New Testament. See, e.g., Mark 16:17; Luke 9:49, 10:17; Acts 2:21, 3:6, 4:7-10 8:16. The wealthy persecutors, in oppressing those saved in His name (a likely reference to baptism) are rejecting the glory and power of the kingdom of God. See Acts 4:18, 5:28.

D. The letter then goes back to a discussion of the law.

1. The letter refers, as Jesus did, to the command to love one's neighbor as oneself, as central to the Law. See Matt. 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-37; see also Rom. 13:8-10. That commandment was also in the Torah, but it seems to refer to countrymen as neighbors, rather than all in need. See Lev. 19:18.

- James calls this a "royal law" or "law of the kingdom," again reminding the reader that the real glory comes from the law.

2. The letter then warns that this partiality violates this basic law, and thus makes people "convicted by the law as

transgressors." There is a trial like atmosphere here, reflecting the inescapability of such conviction.

3. The letter then goes on further to say that fulfilling most or even almost all of the law will not do. The implication is that one must be totally dedicated to the law, or else one has put some other standard above it.

- a. Such is the implication of the greatest commandment and the call to perfection. See Matt. 5:48, 22:34-40.
- b. In the letters to the Romans and Galatians, St. Paul takes a similar point in a different direction, saying that we need the grace of God because we all fall short of the law. See Rom. 3:9-26; Gal. 3:10-14.

E. The letter concludes the point by referring to the law of liberty, the participation in God's creative goodness, this time in the context of recognizing the responsibility we have under it. Because the law, seen in all of its glory, involves not only specific commands, but the whole order of creation, to violate it means more than simply violating a specific statute, but violating the entire loving plan of God. We act in accordance to this law by joining with God in His mercy and goodness shown to others.

- Apparently recognizing that we all fall short of the law's high demands, the letter refers to God's mercy as well but only, as Jesus Himself said, for those who show mercy. Matt. 5:7, 7:1-5, 18:22-34. One enters more into that realm of grace when one is willing to show kindness to others.
- Mercy is not just forgiveness of sins, but the overcoming of all effects of sin. See, e.g., Ps. 136; Matt. 25:31-45; Luke 10:29-37.

III. The letter then turns at more length to a general discussion of the theme of faith and works.

A. It begins with a rhetorical question about whether faith without works can lead to salvation.

1. Jesus had already indicated that, without that active love of neighbor, one's faith is in vain. See, e.g., Matt.

25:31-45; Luke 19:11-27. However, at the time of this letter, the Gospels had probably not been published and the teachings of Jesus may not have been as well known.

2. The assumption of the questions is that some faith is necessary for salvation. St. James thus is in perfect agreement with St. Paul that faith is needed for salvation. His point is that that faith must be an active one.
3. The phrasing of the rhetorical question may reflect Jesus' question "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" See Matt. 16:26.

B. The letter then proceeds onto an example that demonstrates the worthlessness of faith without works, connecting this point to the previous theme of seeing goodness in the poor.

1. The example may be drawn from Jesus' discourse on the Judgment of Nations, see Matt. 25:31-45, or from discourses from Tobit and Isaiah along similar lines, see Tobit 4:16; Is. 58:7; see also 1 John 3:17.
2. The letter does not say that there can be no faith of any sort without works, but rather that the faith is dead, like a corpse.

C. The letter argues that faith and good works are inexorably intertwined and gives a particularly dramatic example, saying that if faith can be reduced to mere strong belief, even the demons have that faith.

1. The argument is addressed to a hypothetical person who says that one person may be saved with faith and another with works, as though there are different means to salvation.

- The argument is that faith and works are connected, and that the one is shown through the other. It is a similar point as Jesus was making with the examples of good and bad fruit. See Luke 6:43-44; see also Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 5:9.

2. He further demonstrates this fact by pointing out that demons can believe in God and in His power, and that does them no good, but is in fact a source of fear. In fact, the demons seemed to recognize Jesus before anyone else, but that was a source of terror. See, e.g., Mark 1:24, 5:7; Luke 4:34.

D. The letter then proceeds onto two rather contrasting examples from Scripture.

1. The examples are introduced to "you empty man." The implication is not necessarily that the reader is that empty man, but rather than one who makes an argument that faith without works can save is empty, for his faith is not filled.

2. The first, and more expected example, is from Abraham and in particular, his extraordinary willingness to obey when God called for the sacrifice of his son Isaac. As the Letter to the Hebrews explains, Abraham thought that God would raise Isaac from the dead, and put his full confidence in God. See Heb. 11:19. Because of his passing this test, God tells Abraham countless descendants and, through them, the source of blessing for all nations. See Gen. 22:15-18. The Jews would see this test as paradigmatic of perfect faith. See Sir. 44:20; 1 Macc. 2:52.

- St. James quotes an earlier passage from Genesis, interpreting it to mean that by his willingness to act in a manner that showed his trust in God, Abraham was made righteous. See Gen. 15:6. He also quotes passages from Second Chronicles and Isaiah saying that Abraham was nothing less than a friend of God. See 2 Chron. 10:7; Is. 41:8.

- St. Paul quotes the same passage from Genesis, but arguing that it indicates that justification through faith comes before the law, for the law was given later through Moses. See Rom. 4:1-12; Gal. 3:1-14.

- The two views are complementary. St. James is arguing that, once there is faith, it must be lived out in action. St. Paul is arguing that one becomes righteous through faith prior to any action.

- The letter then addresses the community at large (you in the plural) to argue that faith acts through and is completed by works based upon it, and that both are needed for justification.

3. The letter then proceeds onto the perhaps surprising example of Rahab, the harlot who protected two Hebrew spies whom Joshua sent to get information on Jericho, the first city of the Promised Land that the Chosen People were to conquer. See Joshua 2:1-21. The Letter to the Hebrews also pointed to Rahab as

an example of one who was saved by faith in action. See Heb. 11:31.

- The idea behind combining these two examples, the exalted leader, on the saved harlot, may be to emphasize both the glory of Christians as friends of God by faith, but also to remind us that we are repentant sinners as well.

E. The section then concludes with the analogy that faith without works is like a dead body.

- The letter may be borrowing the dry mage of Ezekiel who saw scattered bones, representing Israel. He prophesied to the bones and they came together and form bodies, but without life. Then he prophesied to the spirit and they received life. See Ez. 37:1-14. St. James may be using a similar image, but in reverse direction. Christians have received the grace to live in the spirit. But if they do not, they revert back to being lifeless bodies.